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AUTHOR	Hicks, Ellen Cochran
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ABSTRACT

Although both museums and schools figure into a learning network that includes lifelong learning processes in both formal and informal settings, these institutions must work further on achieving common educational goals. According to "Museums for a New Century," a report published in 1984, the museum-school relationship has been marked both by success and dissatisfaction. Museum educators say that teachers view museum visits simply as field trips, rather than serious educational activities; and teachers counter that museum educators do not let them know what their institutions have to offer. To facilitate collaborative efforts between the institutions, museum educators and teachers need to establish contact and develop a fuller understanding of the nature of museum learning, how it differs from classroom learning--particularly since ideas and concepts in museums are framed differently--and how the two settings can complement each other. Visits should be planned cooperatively by museum staff and teachers when they are relevant to curricular purposes. The visits should focus on exhibits related to those purposes and follow-up classroom sessions should build on these visits. Teachers should visit museums to assess potential resources and take advantage of the expertise of museum education specialists, whose responsibilities are to assist teachers in getting the most from museums. (DJR)

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Syracuse University • School of Education
Syracuse, New York 13244-2340
(315) 423-3640

ERIC DIGEST

MUSEUMS AND SCHOOLS AS PARTNERS

The museum-school partnership is a venerable institution. Most people make their first visit to a museum with a school group, and these early experiences help shape their attitudes—positive and not-so-positive—toward museums. This partnership takes on new significance as our society expands its definition of "education" to describe a lifelong process of developing knowledge, skills, and character that takes place not just in the classroom, but in a variety of formal and informal settings. Museums and schools both figure in this learning network, and they have long worked together toward common educational goals.

In the fall of 1984, the American Association of Museums published a report on the present state and future prospects of American museums. Called *Museums for a New Century*, the book was the product of a three-year study by a special commission of museum leaders. The chapter on museum education ("A New Imperative for Learning") asserted bluntly that, despite a strong commitment to educational programming, "museums have yet to realize their full potential as educational institutions" (p. 59). One focus of the commission's concern was museums and schools: "The museum-school relationship shows considerable potential.... particularly in light of the recent calls for strengthening the quality of instruction in science, the arts and the humanities in the schools" (p. 68). But, the report said, "the long relationship between museums and schools has been marked not only by success but by dissatisfaction and frustration" (p. 67).

The success can be attributed to the professionals who plan and carry out students' museum experiences, but the dissatisfaction and frustration come from the same quarters. Museum educators say that teachers view museum visits simply as field trips where their students see interesting things and have fun, rather than as serious educational activities that complement classroom learning. And teachers counter that museum educators don't let them know about the extent of resources their institutions have to offer. It is a dilemma rooted in the quality of communication between museum educators and teachers about their mutual objectives: If museum educators would let teachers know what their institutions have to offer, teachers would be able to use museums more fully as instructional resources, and if teachers took the museum visit seriously, museum educators would invest more in communicating with them. As the Commission on Museums for a New Century interpreted it, too many teachers and museum educators see their relationship as an "us and them" situation.

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Understanding Museum Learning

Museums for a New Century suggested that to achieve the potential of the partnership, both museum educators and teachers should develop a fuller understanding of the nature of the museum learning environment, how it differs from the classroom, and how the two settings are complementary. Learning in schools is most often accomplished through verbal communication, with facts and concepts presented sequentially and in a structured way. In museums, on the other hand, objects are usually the basis of the learning process, which is less structured and partially directed by the learner's own interests, ideas, and experience. (Chapman [1982] provides a good analysis of the nature of museum learning.)

When students leave the classroom to visit a museum, they enter a setting where they are surrounded by "real things" that give a new dimension to the information they are acquiring in school—a model of the solar system showing the spatial relationship of the planets, a period room depicting family life in post-Revolutionary Maryland, or an Impressionist painting capturing both the essence of an artistic form and the atmosphere of society in another era. In museums, ideas and concepts are framed in a different "language" than in the classroom. The student response is different, too. As Harrison and Naef (1985) describe it, "there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, but instead, suppositions concerning what might have been. The more diverse the group in its response, the more successful the learning experience" (p. 10).

What Makes a Good Collaborative Venture

Since the publication of *Museums for a New Century*, the nature of the museum-teacher partnership has begun to shift. The proliferation of collaborative efforts makes it clear that museums are no longer the providers and teachers the recipients; instead, they share the responsibility for finding ways to use museums as curriculum resources. Both teachers and museum representatives must reach out to establish contacts. Teachers should visit local museums in their subject fields to assess potential resources. And many larger museums have education specialists whose responsibility is to assist teachers in getting the most from museum visits.

Regardless of size, museums offer reality that no other resource can provide. It is important, therefore, that visits be planned when they are relevant to curricular purposes. The visit should be focused on the exhibits that relate to those purposes. One of the most frequent errors in visiting a museum with students is to permit them to wander aimlessly. These guidelines are incorporated into four ingredients of a collaborative process that leads to a productive museum visit: (1) The museum staff and the teacher engage in good planning; (2) the teacher prepares the students and coordinates the visit with the classroom curriculum; (3) the trip is focused and involves the students in a structured set of activities at the museum; and (4) a follow-up classroom session extends and builds on the visit (Mitsakos, 1982).

Teachers can strengthen their involvement with local museums—and ultimately improve the quality of their students' museum visits—in the following ways:

- *Make professional connections through national organizations.* The National Art Education Association and the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) both have special groups focusing on museum interests. The NSTA recently formed a task force involving teachers and museum educators to stimulate informal science education in museums. The National Council on the Social Studies has also promoted museums as resources.
- *Form local networks.* There are many examples, among them the Chicago Resource Network, a working group of educators representing all the city's museums and the school system, sponsored by the Field Museum of Natural History. STEAM (Science Teacher Education at Museums), a program sponsored by the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), encourages local partnerships by making grants to science museums in communities across the country to initiate or expand programs introducing teachers to their resources. In New York City, a computerized database called the Cultural Institution Network will make information about the resources of the area's museums and arts institutions more accessible to teachers.
- *Seek partnerships with museums.* The museum-school relationship should be a symbiotic one. Teachers should look for opportunities to use museum resources, and ask museum staff to work with them to plan productive learning experiences that complement classroom activities. Just as museums can offer teachers the opportunity to enrich classroom learning with museum visits, museum educators are looking for creative classroom teachers eager to help them shape productive educational experiences from their wealth of "real things."

Resources

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History News, published bimonthly by the American Association for State and Local History (address below).

Journal of Museum Education, published quarterly by the Museum Education Roundtable (address below).

Museum News, published bimonthly by the American Association of Museums (address below).

Museum Studies Journal, published twice yearly by the Center for Museum Studies, John F. Kennedy University, 1717 Seventeenth St., San Francisco, CA 94103.

Organizations

American Association for State and Local History, 172 Second Ave., North, Suite 102, Nashville, TN 37201; 615-255-2971.

American Association of Museums, 1055 Thomas Jefferson St., NW, Washington, DC 20007; 202-338-5300.

American Association of Museums Education Committee, c/o Patterson B. Williams, Director of Education, Denver Art Museum, 100 W. 14th Ave. Pkwy., Denver, CO 80201; 303-575-2793.

Association of Science-Technology Centers, 1413 K St., NW, Washington, DC 20005; 202-371-1171.

Museum Education Roundtable, P.O. Box 8561, Rockville, MD 20856.

National Art Education Association, 1916 Association Dr., Reston, VA 22019; 703-860-8000.

National Council for the Social Studies, 3501 Newark St., NW, Washington, DC 20016; 202-966-7840.

National Science Teachers Association, 1742 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20009; 202-328-5800.

This report was prepared by Ellen Cochran Hicks, publications consultant and principal author of *Museums for a New Century*, 506 E St., NE, Washington, DC 20002. September 1986.

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